

Vivaldi's Four Seasons

with Europa Galante/Fabio Biondi and Nardus Williams

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.45pm, including a 20-minute interval

Programme

Antonio Vivaldi Violin Concerto in E major, *La primavera* (Spring)

1. Allegro
2. Largo
3. Allegro

Henry Purcell Suite from *The Fairy Queen*

'Thus the ever Grateful Spring'
'See my many colour'd fields'
Dance for the followers of Night
'See, even Night herself is here'
Dance of the haymakers
'Now the Night is chas'd away'

Antonio Vivaldi Violin Concerto in G minor, *L'estate* (Summer)

1. Allegro non molto
2. Adagio – Presto
3. Presto

George Frideric Handel 'Like clouds, stormy winds them impelling' from *The Triumph of Time and Truth*

George Frideric Handel 'Finché d'un zeffiro soave' from *Ezio*

Antonio Vivaldi Violin Concerto in F major, *L'autunno* (Autumn)

1. Allegro
2. Adagio molto
3. Allegro

George Frideric Handel 'Da tempeste' from *Giulio Cesare*

Antonio Vivaldi Violin Concerto in F minor, *L'inverno* (Winter)

1. Allegro non molto
2. Largo
3. Allegro

Fabio Biondi leads his crack period-instrument ensemble Europa Galante in a programme built around one of classical music's most famous works, complemented by arias sung by rising star Nardus Williams.

Irresistible to TV advertisers, piped promiscuously as telephone hold music and in shopping malls from Buenos Aires to Mumbai, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* bids fair to being the most popular classical piece of all time. Yet such is the music's picturesque charm and visceral energy that it has survived over half a century of kitsch and commercialisation unscathed.

Vivaldi included these ever-delightful works in a set of 12 violin concertos published in 1725 under the title *Il Cimento della Armonia e dell'Invenzione* ('The Contest of Harmony and Invention'), with a dedication to a Bohemian count Wenzel von Morzin. In order to 'explain the music more easily', as he put it, Vivaldi prefaced each concerto with an illustrative sonnet, possibly written by himself, and inserted lines from the sonnets at appropriate points in the score.

In the *Four Seasons* Vivaldi ingeniously reconciles his descriptive programme with his characteristic concerto form, in which an orchestral ritornello alternates with free solo episodes. In the first movement of *Spring* the jaunty ritornello symbolises the season's unchanging aspect, while the episodes home in on a particular detail: the dawn chorus, the murmuring brooks and the passing storm. The Largo's drowsy violin cantilena depicts the sleeping goatherd against a background of rustling leaves and (courtesy of violas) a barking dog – one of many humorous touches in the *Seasons*.

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In the bucolic finale nymphs and shepherds dance 'to the festive sound of the rustic pipes', duly evoked by repeated bass drones.

Vivaldi's *Summer* is anything but a pastoral idyll. Drooping figures immediately conjure the torpor of a summer's day. After birdsong imitations, the gentle breezes are challenged by the howling Boreas. Then a poignant solo cantilena portrays the fearful shepherd boy. In the central movement the boy's plaintive song is threatened in turn by swarms of insects and the gathering storm that will erupt spectacularly in the finale.

The jolly peasant dance that opens *Autumn* quickly degenerates into tottering drunkenness, hilariously evoked by the soloist. A slower episode depicts 'the sleeping drunkard', before the dance rounds off the movement. In the Adagio molto the revellers sleep off their intoxication in a chromatic haze. The hushed intensity of this music seems to transcend its immediate descriptive purpose. Headed 'La caccia' (The Hunt) – the finale contrasts the ritornello's horn calls with the soloist's graphic portrayal of the flight and death of the pursued stag, punctured by the 'din of guns and hounds' in the orchestral strings.

At the opening of *Winter* the ritornello depicts the cheerless, icy scene conjured in the sonnet's first verse. Then the solo violin evokes, in swirling, shuddering figuration, the 'howling wind', 'running and stamping feet' and, finally, 'chattering teeth'. For the central Largo ('Passing quiet, contented days by the fireside') Vivaldi moves from an unforgiving F minor to a warm E flat and a long-spun violin melody over a pizzicato accompaniment that suggests flickering flames. Back in F minor, the finale charmingly portrays the skaters' frustrated attempts to keep upright, before tumultuous scales kick up a ferocious storm to rival the one that ended *Summer*.

Europa Galante and Nardus Williams interleave the concertos of the *Four Seasons* with songs and dances by Henry Purcell and George Frideric Handel: a Londoner and a Saxon, born a generation apart, who each in their lifetime became Britain's de facto national composer.

In an era of lavish multimedia entertainments Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* was the most spectacular – and expensive – of them all. The staging, in London's Dorset Garden Theatre in 1692, cost an outlandish £3,000, and involved a huge cast of singers, actors and dancers. Purcell's fairy masques had only a vague connection with the play proper, a bowdlerised version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Restoration audiences could not cope with undiluted Shakespeare). But the music, ranging from rustic farce to the ravishing invocations to Sleep, makes *The Fairy Queen* the richest of all Purcell's so-called 'semi-operas'.

The first two songs in Europa Galante's selection, the tripping 'Thus the ever grateful Spring' and the reflective 'See my many colour'd fields', are sung by Spring and Autumn in the Masque of the *Four Seasons*. The Dance for the followers of Night unfolds as a stately double canon in which first violins are imitated by basses, and seconds by violas. Night herself then appears in an aria with muted violins and no basses – a magical, disembodied texture. Purcell is at his most blithely extrovert in the two final numbers: the lusty Haymakers' Dance, and the song in praise of Oberon 'Now the Night is chas'd away', unfolding over a muscular repeated ground bass.

In Purcell's lifetime and beyond Londoners remained stubbornly resistant to Italian opera. The triumph of Handel's *Rinaldo* in 1711 changed everything; and while the anglicised Saxon would have his share of reverses, opera dominated his creative life for the next three decades. Nardus Williams and Europa Galante perform arias from two Handel operas, plus a solo from the allegorical oratorio *The Triumph of Time and Truth*. First heard at Covent Garden in 1757, this was an English adaptation, probably undertaken by the aged Handel's assistant John Christopher Smith, of his early Italian oratorio *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno*. After Pleasure is finally defeated by Time and Truth, she gives vent to her despairing fury in the aria 'Like clouds, stormy winds them impelling'.

Premiered in January 1732, Handel's *Ezio* is a typical Baroque sanitisation of ancient Roman history that mingles sexual rivalries and political skulduggery. While the opera was a box-office flop, the score is full of delights, including the buoyant 'nautical' aria 'Finché d'un zeffiro soave', in which Ezio's beloved Fulvia resolves to triumph over her misfortunes.

Eight years earlier, in February 1724, *Giulio Cesare* had triumphed at London's King's Theatre. The familiar historical setting doubtless contributed to its popularity, though plot and characters were given a thoroughly Baroque makeover. At the opera's core is the alluring figure of Cleopatra, who sets out to bewitch Caesar, suffers at his imagined death, and is finally united with him as his 'tributary Queen' (as Caesar already has a wife, marriage is not an option). Her joy at their reunion erupts in the coruscating 'Da tempeste', fashioned to display the famed agility of Handel's prima donna Francesca Cuzzoni.

The Fairy Queen

'Thus the ever grateful Spring'

Thus the ever grateful Spring,
Does her yearly tribute bring;
All your sweets before him lay,
Then round his altar sing, and play.

'See my many colour'd fields'

See my many colour'd fields
And loaded trees my will obey;
All the fruit that Autumn yields,
I offer to the God of Day.

'See, even Night herself is here'

See, even Night herself is here,
To favour your design;
And all her peaceful train is near,
That men to sleep incline.
Let noise and care,
Doubt and despair,
Envy and spite
(the fiends' delight)
Be ever banish'd hence.
Let soft repose,
Her eyelids close;
And murmuring streams,
Bring pleasing dreams;
Let nothing stay to give offence.

'Now the Night is chas'd away'

Now the night is chas'd away,
All salute the rising sun;
'Tis that happy, happy day,
The birthday of King Oberon.

Libretto adapted from William Shakespeare's
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Fiché d'un zeffiro soave

Fulvia

Finchè un zeffiro soave
Tien del mar l'ira placata,
Ogni nave è fortunata
E felice ogni nocchier.
E ben prova di coraggio
Incontrar l'onde funeste,
Navigar tra le tempeste
E non perder il sentier.

E ben prova, etc.

Da tempeste

Cleopatra

Da tempeste il legno infranto,
Se poi salvo giunge in porto,
Non sa più che desiar.
Così il cor tra pene e pianto,
Or che trova il suo conforto,
Torna l'anima a bear.

Da tempeste, etc.

Libretto by Nicola Francesco Haym (1678–1729)

Like clouds, stormy winds them impelling

Pleasure

Like clouds, stormy winds then impelling,
Disdainful I fly with resentment.
Hark! the thunder round me rolls,
Truth's awful angry frowns I see:
Her arrows wound my trembling soul;
Nor is there any joy for me.
Ah, no! Truth drives me to depair;
Open, ye rocks, and hide me there.

Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili (1653–1730),
translated by Thomas Morell (1703–84)

Until the gentle breeze
unleashes the ocean's implacable fury,
every ship is fortunate,
every helmsman serene.
But the true test of valour is
to encounter the fearsome waves,
to navigate though the storm,
and not to founder.

Until the gentle, etc.

When the ship, broken by storms,
succeeds at last in making it to port,
it no longer knows what it desires.
Thus the heart, after torments and woes,
once it has recovered its solace,
is beside itself with bliss.

When, etc.

Translation by James O Wootton

Performers

Nardus Williams soprano

Europa Galante

violin/director

Fabio Biondi

violin I

Fabio Ravasi

Barbara Altobello

Rossella Borsoni

violin II

Elin Gabrielsson

Silvia Falavigna

Matilde Tosetti

viola

Stefano Marcocchi

Simone Laghi

cello

Alessandro

Andriani

Perikli Pite

violone

Patxi Montero

theorbo

Giangiaco

Pinardi

harpsichord

Paola Poncet

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